DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 930 RC 018 742

AUTHOR	Theobald, Paul
TITLE	Rural Philosophy for Education: Wendell Berry's Tradition. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-RC-91-12
PUB DATE	Jan 92
CONTRACT	RI-88-062016
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, P.O. Box 1348 Charleston, WV 25325 (free).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Conservation Education; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Environmental Education; Liberal Arts; Role of Education; *Rural Education; *Rural Sociology; Rural to Urban Migration; *Rural Urban Differences; Rural Youth
IDENTIFIERS	*Berry (Wendell); ERIC Digests; *Nature Study

ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest reviews past and present rural educational philosophy, focusing on the views of Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer and novelist who in recent years has emerged as a leading American philosopher. The major difference underlying rural and urban living is the relationship of people with nature. Rural living is much more closely related to nature. Farming, fishing, and logging--typical rural enterprises--must be carried out in ways that conserve the natural world. This principle seems less relevant in an urban setting, where production can often be pressed to whatever level the markeet will bear. Historians believe that schools have incorporated urban tendencies and have required students to become little more than good producers and consumers. The Commission on Country Life, created by President Roosevelt in 1908, was an attempt to counter rural to urban migration. One solution was to stress the study of nature in rural schools in hopes that the appeal of urban life would weaken. By 1920, this movement lost its momentum perhaps due to its proposal that small, rural schools consolidate into larger schools, which was resisted by rural communities. Wendell Berry contends that at present rural schools actively contribute to the decline of rural areas, in both environmental and human terms. Berry calls for a liberal arts curriculum that incorporates rural knowledge and concerns. This will empower rural youth to undertake wise action to cultivate practices and knowledge that will influence their lives for the better. If rural communities are going to survive, rural education must re-establish its equilibrium with nature. (LP)

ED345930

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RURAL PHILOSOPHY FOR EDUCATION: WENDELL BERRY'S TRADITION

by Paul Theobald

January 1992

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RC018742

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools January 1992

Rural Philosophy For Education: Wendell Berry's Tradition

by Paul Theobald

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IN RECENT YEARS Kentucky farmer and novelist Wendell Berry has emerged as a leading American philosopher. All of his work deals in some way with rural life. Berry has had a great deal to say about schools and, by implication, rural education. This Digest considers what rural educational philosophy is all about, where it has been in the past, and where this thinker would like to see it go in the future.

A word about educational philosophy

Over the years, educators and policymakers have paid scant attention to educational philosophy. Even scholars, for instance, rarely analyze the behavior of people in schools to discover the philosophy behind it. A common view is that the real work of eduction belongs to teachers and administrators in the nation's public schools—work to which philosophy does not apply. In part, educational philosophy seems to generate so little interest because observing its workings first-hand is so difficult. Many people simply conclude that philosophy is an abstruse system of beliefs, perhaps suitable for faculty members in elite universities, but otherwise useless.

The Greek philosopher Plato examined a similar view over two thousand years ago. In the parable of the star-gazer, Plato described the situation of a ship's captain, who spends many hours gazing at the stars. The sailors view him as useless, or worse—a parasite. Yet, without the work of the captain, the sailors would be lost, and their work would be in vain. So it is, Plato argued, with philosophers.

A precedent for rural educational philosophy

Some of America's greatest intellectuals—Jefferson, Thoreau, and Emerson—wrote about the national importance of a healthy rural society. For them, the urban world was a place of purposeless noise, commotion, and filth (Shi, 1985). Only in the countryside, they thought, could life take on a truly human meaning— a life in which the best qualities of humankind could flourish.

The major philosophical difference underlying rural and urban living is the relationship of people with nature. If nature is the home of human beings, then they must care for that home wisely. This circumstance does not confront urban people so forcefully as it confronts rural people. For example, farming, fishing, and logging—typical rural enterprises—must be carried out in ways that conserve the natural world. Future production requires conservation and preservation of the soil, the waters, and the forests. This principle seems less relevant in an urban setting, where production can often be pressed to whatever level the market will bear.

Late in the last century, Thorstein Veblen (1979/1899) wrote about an emerging urban culture unhindered by limits imposed by nature. He considered a key feature of this culture to be "conspicuous consumption." The twentieth century urban world placed a premium on limitless production and consumption (as intimately related processes). In such a culture, the public exhibition of purchasing power becomes a hallmark of both wasteful production and of elevated social status.

An incident in the life of industrialist Henry Ford illustrates this point well. A marketing specialist approached Ford with an advertising slogan that read, "Buy a Ford and Save the Difference." Ford reportedly crossed out the word "save" and penciled in "spend."

Historians believe that schools incorporated such tendencies; henceforth students needed primarily to become good producers and consumers (Karier, 1967; Tyack, 1974; Violas, 1978). Some people took exception to this tendency, and countered it with a rural educational philosophy.

The country life movement

Liberty Hyde Bailey, of Cornell University, was perhaps the most notable of these people (Berry, 1990). He headed Theodore Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life, created in 1908. Roosevelt and Bailey regarded rural citizens as the "balance force" or "middle wheel" of society. Unfortunately, in their view, growing migration from the countryside to the cities (and from other countries to the cities) threatened to unbalance society.

The Commission prescribed a variety of solutions. These solutions included free mail service, an agricultural extension program, improvement of rural roads, and a postal savings bank. The reform of rural schools, however, absorbed most of the energy of Country Lifers. Bailey urged rural schools to abandon traditional recitation pedagogy and to adopt the new approach of his contemporary, John Dewey. Like Jefferson, Thoreau, and Emerson, Bailey wanted to center rural schooling around the study of nature. Bailey believed that if rural students could grasp the beauty and wonder of the countryside, the appeal of urban life would weaken. Students would stay in the country, and the "balance force" would continue to stabilize society.

By 1920, the Country Life movement had lost momentum. Many of its proposals started real change, but its program for rural schools had foundered. One of its proposals had been that small rural schools consolidate into larger, more centralized schools. Rural people resisted. This proposal—which meets similar resistance today—may have contributed to the decline of the movement.

Whatever the causes, the Country Life movement clearly failed in its main mission. The cityward migration of rural American youth not

only continued, it is still a fundamental dilemma facing rural communities. Technology helped the land became more productive, and farming became mechanized. As a result, the number of farms and of farmers in this country has declined sharply. This trend profoundly disturbs Wendell Berry, because by 1940 technology seemed to make care for the equilibrium between people and land increasingly irrelevant (Berry, 1990).

The educational philosophy of Wendell Berry

Contemporary circumstances suggest that this conclusion was premature. In recent years, concern for the fate of rural communities and the fate of the environment have again become pressing issues. Wendell Berry's work has contributed to the renewed interest (see, for example, Berry, 1986).

Like Emerson and Thoreau before him, Berry is skeptical about the ability of public schools to direct social change. "Institutions," writes Berry, "unless constrained by the moral vision of the persons in them...move in the direction of power and self-preservation, not high principle" (Berry, 1981, p. 212). Berry nonetheless believes that rural schools might contribute more than they do to the well-being of rural society and to the quality of life in America generally.

He takes issue with many observers in identifying the shortcomings of modern schooling. He maintains that "the purpose of education [in the United States] has been to prepare people to 'take their places' in an industrial society" (Berry, 1990, p. 25). He claims that schools are too practical, too intent on creating students who are merely producers and consumers.

Lacking a sense of fundamental principles, rural schools have adopted a misguided view of education by default. According to Berry (1990), rural schools now actively contribute to the decline of rural areas, in both environmental and human terms.

In contrast to contemporary calls for more or better practical education, Berry calls for a liberal arts curriculum in rural schools, tempered with a critical edge. Like Dewey, Berry wants to see students define the boundaries of a democratic society. To deal with trespasses of such boundaries, he would have students develop the courage to take appropriate action.

Thus, according to Berry, liberal learning in rural schools must also incorporate rural knowledge and concerns. This position is critical to Berry's philosophy, since, in his view, the national economy misuses both rural people and rural resources for short-term gains. Not only does this short-sightedness damage rural areas, it neglects the most worthy purposes to which people might otherwise aspire. Rural communities must educate their young to undertake wise action to cultivate practices and knowledge that will influence their lives for the better.

If rural dwellers are to have real communities, then, according to Berry, the equilibrium with nature must be re-established. People must care intimately for one another and cherish the land they inhabit. They must also care more closely for the ways they know one another, the rituals of their daily lives, and their knowledge of the local environment (Berry, 1990).

As presently constituted, rural education does none of these things, according to Berry. In his view, the measure of production must be how well it can be sustained over time. Sustainable production is necessary for establishing and nurturing the real community—the common cultural ground—of rural places. Otherwise, the national economy will continue to destroy rural society and the natural environment (Berry, 1978).

A literary scholar with a brilliant future ahead of him as a faculty member at New York University in the early 1960s, Wendell Berry left the academic fast-track behind and returned to the land he considered part of his familial and cultural heritage in Kentucky. He writes and farms now in his "native and chosen place." The New York Times has called Berry the "prophet of rural America" (Schneider, 1988). The rural education community has much to gain by considering his views of rural life and rural education.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract no. RI-88-062016. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the Department of Education.

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